

Are We One-in-Ten?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 18, 2018—Harvest Sunday

- Psalm 105:1-3 Good News Translation
Give thanks to the LORD, proclaim his greatness;
tell the nations what he has done.
²Sing praise to the LORD;
tell the wonderful things he has done.
³Be glad that we belong to him;
let all who worship him rejoice.
- Luke 17:11-19 Good News ¹¹ As Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, he went along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² He was going into a village when he was met by ten men suffering from a dreaded skin disease. They stood at a distance ¹³ and shouted, "Jesus! Master! Have pity on us!" ¹⁴ Jesus saw them and said to them, "Go and let the priests examine you." On the way they were made clean. ¹⁵ When one of them saw that he was healed, he came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself to the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him. The man was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus spoke up, "There were ten who were healed; where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Why is this foreigner the only one who came back to give thanks to God?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Get up and go; your faith has made you well."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Being grateful enlarges the gift.

Let's talk about leprosy. Most of us know of leprosy only from the Bible, not from any exposure to it in our lives. Leprosy is the name of a specific disease affecting skin and nerves. It's contagious not from physical contact but from inhaling infected droplets from coughs or sneezes. Leprosy isn't nearly as easy to catch as, say, influenza. Today leprosy is found only in some tropical parts of Asia and Africa and is treatable.¹

In ancient times the term "leprosy" was used to describe a number of similar diseases, in the same way the brand name "Kleenex"TM is sometimes used to describe any disposable facial tissue. A person with any such disease used to be called a "leper." Communities were so fearful of being contaminated by a leper that lepers were pushed away, forced to live with fellow lepers in secluded communes, required to keep their distance from people who weren't infected, dependent on the kindness of others for many of their daily needs.

Today's gospel reading used to be referred to as the story of Jesus healing ten lepers, but nowadays we realize it's not right to refer to someone by a condition—we don't refer to a person as a cripple or an epileptic. So now we refer to this passage simply as a story of Jesus healing ten men. Luke is the only gospel writer to tell it.

The story is easy to follow. Keeping their distance as societal norms required, the ten men with a contagious skin disease called out to the famous teacher as he was passing by: "Jesus! Sir! Have pity on us—help us!"

Hearing the story we wonder, "What will he do? How will he help them?" In other instances, Jesus healed a man's paralyzed hand simply by directing the man to flex the immobile extremity, which he suddenly was able to do (Mk. 3:1-6), or he healed a woman's chronic

1

https://www.google.com/search?q=leprosy+definition&rlz=1C1CHFX_enUS823US823&oq=Lepro&aqs=chrome.5.69i57j0l5.6158j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 accessed 11/17/2018

hemorrhaging because she struggled and strained merely to be able to touch the hem of his robe (Mk. 5:25-34), or he healed a man who was deaf and mute by placing his fingers in the man's ears and then touching his finger to the man's tongue (Mk. 7:31-37).

But in this instance Jesus didn't lay his hands upon the men, nor did he allow them to touch him. Instead he just told them to go to the doctor for a clean bill of health. Well, in a manner of speaking, he did. He actually told them to be examined by priests. That was the procedure if you wanted to be declared officially "cured" of your dreaded skin disease. It's described in the first half of Leviticus Chapter 14 among the regulations God gave Moses about how to structure community life. (If you think your doctor's instructions are hard to follow, read Leviticus Chapter 14!) So if you had been excluded from society by a dreaded skin disease, a declaration by a priest that you were healed and ritually clean meant that you were once again "safe" and could be allowed to return to normal society and to the community's worship.

In the story the ten men set off to be examined by the priests as Jesus instructed. They hadn't been healed yet. Jesus didn't say to them, "You are healed." He just told them to do what they would need to do *if* they were healed... and in faith the ten men started off toward the temple. Luke says that it wasn't until they were on their way that their disease was healed. Imagine that moment. Lumpy, discolored skin becomes smooth and clear, deformed limbs regain normal form and function, and disfigured facial features become unremarkable. Their leprous conditions disappear! Nine of the ten proceeded to the temple, certainly overcome with excitement and joy at having received this gift they had hoped for for months and years.

But one man stops, turns, and runs toward Jesus, shouting, "God be praised! God is great and good! Thanks be to God!" He stops before Jesus, looking him in the eye, then drops to his knees, hands clasped. "Thank you, teacher. I... well – thank you, teacher!"

Jesus smiles at the man and reaches down to help him to his feet. Holding the man's hand high Jesus says to his disciples, "Weren't there ten men who were healed Where are the other nine?"

Oh, before the story ends I should point out one other thing that was distinctive about the ten men who were healed. Luke refers to them as "foreigners." Here's why. Jesus and his disciples were traveling from the region of Galilee in the north of Israel to Jerusalem in the region of Judea to the south. They had to pass through a region in between the Galilee and Judea. That region was called Samaria – remember hearing about "The Good Samaritan"? Being a Samaritan meant he was from this region called Samaria.

The Jews and Samaritans didn't like each other. They had common Jewish roots, but at a certain point the Jews in Samaria began intermarriage with the non-Jewish locals. This caused Jews in the Galilee to the north and in Judea to the south to look down on the Samaritans as "defectors" who betrayed their Jewish heritage for the convenience of marrying locals. The Samaritans resented being looked down upon by their Jewish neighbors. There was a lot of trash-talking back and forth, frequent harassment, even some scattered acts of vandalism against one or the other. What made this feud interesting was that the main road that Jews had to use to travel between the Galilee to the north and Jerusalem to the south passed through Samaria.

The Samaritans were considered "foreigners" to the Jews, even though these Samaritans were right there in their own region of Samaria. That's why Jesus pointed out that although Jews viewed Samaritans with scorn, in fact these ten Samaritans displayed confident faith in Jesus. They demonstrated their faith by following his command to show themselves to the priests even before they knew that they had been healed. Jesus ends this little lesson by assuring the returning Samaritan, "It was your faith that has made you well."

~ ~ ~

But this story is not really about healing, although that is the dramatic action in the story. This story is really about gratitude. The act of healing provides Jesus with an occasion to teach his followers about the importance of having a grateful outlook. In his study of this passage, one scholar of Luke's gospel has stated that the other nine men miss "the greatest moment of their lives" by failing to acknowledge the giver of the gift of healing.² They now possess health and wholeness, restoration to society and reunion with family. But they failed to be filled by the joy and trust that also could have been theirs had they expressed gratitude for what they had received.

One in ten. A Bible scholar has suggested that the reaction of the Samaritans is probably intended to reflect how little we tend to be grateful. Don't you think that that's probably a pretty good estimate of the percentage of the time we acknowledge the blessings we receive – one-tenth of the time? We may be thankful for a report being turned in, or a new garment we got on sale, or the gravy turning out just like grandma's always did... but how many more opportunities did we overlook when we could have acknowledged a blessing, a gift, a relationship, a general condition of well-being that we take for granted – or worse, a blessing we don't even realize that we have?

- Maybe we all do this – or maybe I'm as strange as I imagine – but from time to time I'll think to myself, "Thank you, God, that I *don't* have a sore throat right now, because when I do, I remember how much I can't wait for it to be over." Imagine being grateful for what's normal.
- Maybe you can be grateful for being a little bored, or even lonely, because you remember how pressed you felt when demands on your time from work and from other people overwhelmed you constantly.
- I wonder if you can be grateful for stormy weather or arctic blasts? "Yucky weather" may be inconvenient and uncomfortable, but don't you want your flowers to bloom and your lawn to green up next spring? And remember how you complained as you sweltered in the heat and humidity about four months ago? So even if you're not a skier or sledder or snowman-builder or plow-truck driver, consider what there is about winter that you can be grateful for.

It would be interesting to hear just how many ordinary things we can find to be grateful for:

- Grateful that the newspaper wasn't soaked when you picked it up from the driveway...
- Appreciative that you have a washer and dryer in your home so it's convenient to keep your clothes clean...
- Thank goodness that your car battery is working the way it should...
- Thankful for the pleasant community you live in...

On the radio this morning I heard someone say, "The more we are grateful, the more we have to be grateful for."³ How much more capacity can we create to notice and express gratitude in our daily lives? You'd never run out, and imagine how much more you would appreciate all that God is in your life. That's what Jesus wanted us to discover – not his ability to heal, but our capacity to be grateful.

[Sermons: se20181118; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Anchor Bible – The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV): Introduction, Translation and Notes*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985, p. 1155

³ Lloyd Newell, "Music and the Spoken Word," broadcast for 11/18/2018.